

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 20A

THE MIAMI HERALD
1 February 1985

Congressmen now stand in line to join intelligence committees

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WASHINGTON — Not long ago, congressmen almost had to be ambushed in the hall to get them to join on the House and Senate Intelligence Committees. That's not true any more, thanks in large part to the CIA's covert war against Nicaragua.

More than 50 Democrats and 40 Republicans sought seats on the 14-member House panel, said the office of House Speaker O'Neill's Thomas P. O'Neill, D-Mass. On the Senate side, an aide to Majority Leader Robert Dole, R-Kan., said 15 members wanted assignments to the eight seats that became available on the panel this year.

Each committee has 14 members with the majority and minority leaders of each chamber also serving as ex-officio members.

Slots on both committees opened this year because of internal rotation rules, requiring the departure of eight members from each panel.

The new chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Ind., recalls the 1970s as a time when congressional leaders and staff aides went up and down the halls looking for people.

That was in an era when the United States was emerging from the triple trauma of CIA capers, Vietnam and Watergate. It was also a time when dirty laundry was washed in public and afterwards few wanted to be publicly associated with it.

Moreover, joining the intelligence committees meant keeping secrets, and keeping secrets meant not being able to use the information to score points with constituents back home.

Why is it so popular all of a sudden to join these committees?

"It's glamorous," Hamilton said. "I guess it's related to the idea that information is power and members have the perception that those of us on the committee know more than we probably do."

"But I guess the major reason is Central America. The committee has been the focus of Central American matters and that's big, of course."

In addition to media attention, members also get certain privileges unavailable to other committees.

For example, they are privy to the most sensitive information collected by American intelligence, nicely packaged and printed for them every morning in The National Intelligence Daily, the only secret newspaper in the United States.

Members also get high-level classified briefings by CIA Direc-

tor William Casey and frequently see the president.

In addition, each Senate panel member gets an extra staff aide. And those in the House are not required to relinquish other committee assignments, which means they get to double power and exposure.

The committees were established in the aftermath of investigations into CIA abuses during the 1970s. Their mandate is to make sure the CIA and other intelligence agencies do not repeat the mistakes of the past.